

SERMON: 2018/01/28 (4th Sunday aft. Epiphany, Year B) - 1 Cor. 8:1-13 & Mk. 1:12-28

[Invite the children to sit at the front.]

The last time we saw one another I was telling you that Saint Paul said "everything is lawful for us as Christians," *but* that doesn't mean we should do whatever we feel like. And the first reason is that doing "good" is a necessary part of our 'adoption' as the people chosen to live again in God's eternal Kingdom. But today, he gives us *another* reason, and that's because each one of us is a "role model" to those around us. Do you know what that means?

Well, what does a pirate have in his possession?

[Wait for answers: a large, floppy hat, earrings, a wooden leg, etc.]

A parrot?!  
Exactly.

And what do parrots do?  
They "mimic" don't they?  
Whatever they hear they repeat it.

And our friends and those around us can copy us like parrots too, so we should be careful that we don't lead them into making mistakes.

Let's pray: Father God, by your Holy Spirit, help us to be mindful of those who might be listening and copying us. Help us that we don't lead them astray, in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

'[And] Jesus...went into Capernaum'. [Pause.]

Up to this moment, He had been hanging around the quaint little villages of Galilee, nestled (up there) in the northern hills of Israel.

It is a picturesque place.

A simple place.

A quiet region of no importance.

You might call it a "backwater."<sup>[n.1]</sup>

The Apostle Nathanael certainly thought so! [Jn. 1:46]

His reaction to hearing that it was the home to someone who was potentially

the Messiah - "the Christ" - is one of incredulity.

He laughs at the idea, and pokes fun at it the way comedians do "the flyover states."

The people who lived there were peasants.

They were conservative.

Deeply religious.

Unexciting.

They worked long days, and with their hands.

They made their living by brawn - by muscle-power - either their own or that of an ox or a mule - and it grew or shrank depending on their reputation - their honesty and character.

These were people who spoke their minds, had few personal possessions, intermarried with their neighbours, and cherished the "old ways:"

those tried n' tested habits and manners of their forebears.

They had no time for "fads" or "trends," and couldn't afford them anyhow.

And it was from among such "slow pokes" - ol' fashioned, *provincial* Jews - that Jesus recruited His first followers.

And then, having gotten them together, He takes them straight into the heart of the largest town around - a 'city', in fact [see: Lk. 4:31] - to the synagogue, the hub.[n.2]

Imagine them, those rustic, dusty "out-of-town-ers," stumbling into the middle what was likely a very erudite, sophisticated circle of local dignitaries: *this* is the middle of the day, after all, when most needed to be out in the sunshine plying their trade, so these must've been men of leisure! Of wealth and learning.

And their sport was not chess or golf but to endlessly debate "the Law" in the civilised cool of what was, the archaeologists say, a '*magnificent*' shiny, white limestone building that *they* themselves had probably paid for.[n.3]

By His style of clothing - His hair covered by a prayer shawl - and His command of the disciples behind Him, those men will have immediately recognised Jesus as a "rabbi," albeit an unusually young one.

And for someone like that to come to this place wasn't abnormal:

There were many religious teachers - philosophers, witchdoctors and eccentrics - in that period who spent their lives journeying from one synagogue to another, up and down the land; dispensing wisdom, charms and prophecies.

[n.4]

But then, we hear, Jesus opened His mouth and begun to offer '*new*', *innovative* interpretations of the Scriptures [Mk 1:27].

And for these we have to turn to John's gospel, to chapter six.

And what we find there is *fascinating*.

Jesus, cryptically, alludes to the Last Supper, and the necessity for a *violent*,

atoning sacrifice by one He calls, 'the Son of Man' [v.53-58].

*And why?!*

Because, He explains, 'the flesh is useless.' [Jn. 6:63]

And by that He meant the current "system" of Jewish piety, which, like Islam today, saw God as a tyrant who needed to be appeased - *placated* - by regular gifts; that one *bought* - quite literally - His favour with tithes and good behavior and so on.

But Jesus *trashes* this idea.

Trips to the Temple and suchlike are '*useless*', He taught, '*unless...*[you] abide in me', [Jn. 6:52-55].

And this was scandalous!

Offensive, even.

And not just because it contradicted the consensus, (which it did!), but because of the implication that *He* was that unique, special figure, holding the 'keys' to eternal life, [Rev. 1:18].

This is shocking.

Seemingly, *crazy-talk*.

It was words like these that had almost got our Savior stoned in Nazareth.

And I want you to consider that fact *and then* to reflect on the reaction of His hearers in *this* passage in Capernaum:

and I quote, 'They were all amazed...[and a]t once [H]is fame began to spread', [v.28].

So, what makes the difference?

The response of the crowd in this synagogue completely diverges from that earlier incident.

*Why?!*

Because of Jesus' encounter with 'a man with an unclean spirit', [v.23].

Now, let's pause for a moment.

Let's pause and acknowledge the scepticism that many of us feel about this whole "business" of exorcism.

Right?

People don't *actually* get "taken over" by mal-evil entities: they're just sick, aren't they?

Confused.

"Unbalanced."

They're suffering from a lack of lithium in their diet or too much, or something. An iodine deficiency perhaps.

Or from excessive espresso consumption on an empty stomach.

Demons exist only in movies.

Only in the mind of Hollywood screen-writers looking to make a quick buck off a gullible public looking for spooky adrenaline "kicks."

No?

This poor "soul" was just mad, wasn't he?  
Misdiagnosed.

But look again.

Notice that the author doesn't mention the 'man' was raving.

And neither does Luke in his account, [see: 4:32-35].

He wasn't drooling or gesticulating wildly.

He wasn't aggressive or obscene.

And if that is how you picture him, let's be clear that, for this episode at least, you're the one reading that *into* the text.

It suggests none of it.

*Nor*, should we assume that the ancients mistook all mental illness for possession - that they always - and falsely - attributed unusual behavior to supernatural forces like "faeries;" and that Jesus' activity would better be described as "therapy" rather than something more miraculous.

And there are some scholars who claim as much:

Indeed, some would say that the oppressive 'colonial situation of domination and revolution [that prevailed (back) then] nourishe[d]...extraordinary [psychological disorder]...', [n.5], and that this was what the Lord was (really) squaring up against.

But *I* would say such a presumption is a *prejudicial* one.

And contrary to the evidence:

From at least the 5th century *B. C.*, the Greeks, for example, whose cultural world encompassed the Galilee, saw human ailment as having very definite *organic* causes, [n.6], and disseminated books 'giving physiological explanations instead.' [n.7]

And in the Old Testament, in *Daniel*, Nebuchadnezzar is described as losing his 'reason' - those are the terms - when he goes to live, naked in the field as an 'oxen', [4:31-34]. There's no mention of demons.

The Hebrews had a word for "mad," you see, '*mešugga*' and it meant *something* along the lines of "'to be like a bear with a sore head'", [n.8].

"Agitated" in other words.

"Prickly."

"Wild!"

And Mark doesn't describe any of this.

Instead, he offers, essentially, proof of an alarming reality that we often acknowledge: of a *spiritual* dimension to the universe that is actively corrupting and corroding God's creation; of the existence of *non-human* dark, *sinister* sentiences who wish us harm.

And we *recoil* from this fact, even as we give easy assent to the likelihood of aliens in other galaxies.

But here Jesus enters into an actual conversation with a(n invisible) somebody who was wearing another's body like a glove; a puppet.  
This should *chill* you.

*And yet(!)*, Christ is supreme.

With a single sentence He banishes His antagonist.

It is no contest whatsoever.

Rejoice, then.

And pray: pray regularly to God, who is - as we see, demonstrably - master of all things, that He would protect you and guard you.

Amen.

#### Footnotes:

1. See: Osborne, Grant R. (2010, *Matthew (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, 529 & 945.
2. See: Masterman, E. W. G. (April 1908), 'Capernaum', *The Biblical World*, Volume 31, No. 4, pp. 247-264, esp. 247; or, Tzaferis, Vasillios (December 1983), 'New Archaeological Evidence on Ancient Capernaum', *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Volume 46, No. 4, pp. 198-204, 200.
3. Masterman (1908), 249.
4. See: Horsley, Richard A. and Hanson, John S. (1985), *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus*, Minneapolis, M. N.: Winston Press, 160-162, 172-173.
5. Hollenbach, Paul W. (December 1981), 'Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 49, No. 4, pp. 567-588, esp. 574-575.
6. Chakravarty, Tina (May 2011), 'Medicalisation of Mental Disorder: Shifting Epistemologies and Beyond', *Sociological Bulletin*, Volume 60, No. 2, pp. 266-286, 268.
7. Beck, Julie (23rd of January 2014), 'Diagnosing Mental Illness in Ancient Greece and Rome', *The Atlantic*, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/01/diagnosing-mental-illness-in-ancient-greece-and-rome/282856/> (accessed January 27, 2018).
8. Vartejanu-Joubert, Madeline (2017), 'Representations of Madman and Madness in Jewish Sources from the Pre-Exilic to the Roman-Byzantine Period', in Eghigian, Greg (Ed.), *The Routledge History of Madness and Mental Health*, Abingdon, Oxon.; New York, N. Y.: Routledge (Taylor & Francis), pp. 19-41, 19-20.

